

Ethics of Stem-Cell Research

McGee and Caplan

Prelims

What is SCR?

Why is it so controversial?

Prelims

Three main sources of stem-cells:

- 1. Normal living adults**
- 2. “Left-over” frozen embryos from fertility clinics**
- 3. Embryos that have been cloned.**

A Tension in M and C's Argument

On the one hand, embryos are persons that are destroyed (killed) when stem cells are taken (strand 1)

On the other hand, embryos as persons are not really destroyed by SCR (strand 2)

Strand 1: Embryos are persons that are destroyed (killed) when stem cells are taken

The Big Ethical Question:

Are we permitted to intentionally take the lives of embryos (persons) for the sake of the greater good?

M and C say 'yes'

M and C are utilitarians: SCR is morally obligatory given the good consequences that result from the practice.

Assume the embryo is a person, it has a right to life, but that right doesn't entail that the embryo cannot be justifiably killed.

Why?

Some sort of Tradeoff Principle:

"Adults and even children are sometimes forced to give life, but only in the defense or at least interest of the community's highest ideals and most pressing interests."

"One would expect that the destruction of embryonic life, whatever its moral status, would also take place only under the most scrupulous conditions and for the best communal reasons."

Strand 1: Embryos are persons that are destroyed (killed) when stem cells are taken

Is there, then, a good reason that would justify us in doing violence to embryos?

M and C: Yes

The tradeoff is better:

- **“It is a central tenet of contemporary medicine that disease is almost always to be attended to and treated because it brings such pain and suffering to its victims and to their family and communities. Trade-offs are made in the treatment of disease, against cost and other competing social demands.”**
- **“More than half of the world’s population will suffer at some point in life with one of these three conditions (cancer, heart disease, degenerative diseases), and more humans die every year from cancer than were killed in both the Kosovo and Vietnam conflicts. Stem cell research is a pursuit of known and important moral goods.”**

Strand 2: Embryos as persons are not really destroyed by SCR

“Grant for a moment that a 100-cell human blastocyst, approximately the size of the tip of an eyelash and totally lacking in cellular differentiation, is a fully human person. What does such a person’s identity mean, and in what ways can it be destroyed? What would it mean for such a person to die? When could such a death be justified? These questions require a new kind of analysis.”

“The human embryo from which stem cells are to be taken is an undifferentiated embryo. It contains mitochondria, cytoplasm, and the DNA of mother and father within an egg wall. None of the identity of that embryo is wrapped up in its memory of its origins: it has no brain cells to think, no muscle cells to exercise, no habits. The 100 cell embryo has one interesting and redeeming feature, which as best anyone can tell is the only thing unique about it: its recombined DNA.... At 100 cells, nuclear DNA is the only feature of the embryo that is not replaceable by donor components without compromising the critical features of the initial recombination of maternal and paternal genetic material after sex.”

Personal identity 101

A bit of a tangent, but interesting...

One major question that many philosophers have reflected on is the question of what makes a person the same person over time.

What makes Joe at 4 yrs old the same Joe at 24 yrs old?

There are various answers, but it seems that what M and C are suggesting is that our personal identity is defined by our recombined DNA.

Some prima facie observations:

- **Their reason seems to be that b/c the recombined DNA is the only unique physical feature of a 100 cell blastocyst, therefore that our recombined DNA is our essential nature (i.e., what makes you...you)**
- **This is, at most, a suggestion worth exploring, but they seem to assert the truth of it.**
- **Problem: given their view a clone with the same DNA would literally be you. You will actually exist in more than two places at one time. You could be in Hawaii chillin' on the beach AND sitting in class!**

Strand 2: Embryos as persons are not really destroyed by SCR

**The essential nature of the 100 cell embryo is its 'recombined DNA'.
When the stem cells are extracted, the DNA is neither damaged nor destroyed.**

Thus, we're not sacrificing persons via SCR